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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 0242
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 5475
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 003234

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SUBJECT: THAI PUBLIC OPINION SWINGS IN FAVOR OF DPRK
WEAPONS INTERDICTION

REF: BANGKOK 3129

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Public commentary regarding the Thai government's December 11 seizure of a cargo plane carrying 35 tons of weapons from North Korea at a Bangkok airport has turned markedly positive after some initial media coverage and statements from the political opposition that questioned the interdiction. The level of attention paid to the RTG action by local media has remained high over the last week with stories and editorials covering the case in both Thai- and English-language dailies. After Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban, and other RTG officials made a strong public case for the government's decision to act, editorials in English-language dailies commended the RTG for the seizure, while reports on the interdiction remained on the front pages of several leading local dailies over the last week. Local television stations have also broadcast features on the interdiction.

¶2. (C) Comment: With public sentiment now strongly supportive of the Thai government's successful interdiction of the North Korean weapons, the case represents a success in international efforts to enforce UNSCR sanctions against North Korea, and underscores Thailand's role as an valuable partner of the U.S. on important security and law enforcement issues. While in some quarters, initial media coverage of the interdiction appeared to reflect fear that the country had veered from what has been termed a historical Thai aversion to meddling into the affairs of others, PM Abhisit and DPM Suthep took charge of the debate by effectively defending the government's actions. Predictably, the opposition Puea Thai Party sought to fan domestic political flames by publicly blasting the RTG and asserting that the plane seizure could come back to haunt Thailand. Despite these attacks, many now appear confident that Thailand demonstrated strong international leadership on the international community's actions against North Korea. End summary and comment.

RTG GETS IN FRONT OF PUBLIC OPINION ON WEAPONS SEIZURE

¶3. (SBU) Following the December 11 interdiction of a cargo plan carrying weapons from North Korea to a still publicly undisclosed destination, various media outlets and opposition

politicians criticized Prime Minister Abhisit's government for potentially endangering Thailand. The Thai-language outlet Mathichon in an editorial urged the government to distance itself from the interdiction as the action could put Thailand in danger. Other newspaper columns argued that North Korea, or other involved nations, might retaliate against Thailand for interfering with the arms transaction. In addition, opposition Puea Thai politicians Jatuporn Prompan and Surapong Tovichakchaikul used the interdiction as an opportunity to attack the government. Despite these criticisms, the Thai government successfully presented the justification for the interdiction and apparently has succeeded in swinging public opinion strongly in its favor.

14. (SBU) At a time when the RTG faced challenges on numerous fronts -- including an aggressive political opposition, troublesome relations with Cambodia, and an adverse court ruling in regard to the Map Ta Phut industrial zone -- Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva December 16 argued publicly that Thailand had interdicted the arms as a responsible member of the international community and had thereby promoted its national interests. Deputy Prime Minister for Security Affairs Suthep Thaugsuban has consistently argued the case for the interdiction. In referencing Thailand's responsibilities under the UNSCRs in regard to North Korea, Suthep took the lead in calming public concerns over theoretical repercussions following the action. Suthep also confirmed publicly that Thailand would follow relevant precedents in regard to the UNSCRs. Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya has been equally valuable in influencing public debate of the interdiction. Kasit highlighted publicly

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December 17 the RTG's commitment to the UNSCRs on the DPRK. Kasit was quoted publicly as stating that the Thai government had seized the weapons under obligations to UNSCR 1874 and said that as a responsible member of the world community, Thailand would proceed with demolishing the weapons.

PRESS COVERAGE SWINGS POSITIVE

15. (SBU) Following the Abhisit administration's decision to make a strong public case for the interdiction, media coverage shifted in favor of the government's action. A December 22 editorial in the top-circulating English-language daily Bangkok Post praised the Abhisit government's actions. The Post said that security agencies and the government were "reaping deserved credit" for their role in enforcing the most important UNSCR on North Korea. The Post went on to argue that those critical of the Thai government's action were not only in a minority, but were wrong. The editorial closed by asserting that the strong, public action taken by Thailand would deter North Korea and other governments from taking action that jeopardized international peace and security. As such, the Post declared that no one should doubt that Thailand had acted correctly in seizing the plane.

16. (SBU) Leading international affairs commentator Kavi Chongkittavorn praised the Thai government's decision to seize the North Korean weapons in a December 21 editorial in the English-language daily The Nation. Referencing the Thai aversion to confrontation, Kavi wrote that it was "customary for the Thai media and public to entertain the notion that we should stay out of troubles at all costs, especially when the circumstances involve neighboring or foreign countries." That said, Kavi argued that this case both demonstrated Abhisit's ability to maintain Thailand's regional and international profile, as well as helped to combat criticism leveled against Thailand since domestic political turmoil came to the forefront in 2006.

17. (SBU) Thai language press has also supported the Abhisit government's decision to interdict the arms. A December 17 editorial in the Thai Rath (the most widely read Thai-language daily) argued that Thailand should work with

the United Nations in order to prove to the world that Thailand was a responsible nation. Furthermore, a commentator in the Kom Chad Luek newspaper criticized opposition politicians for their attempts to exploit the interdiction as a means to attack the government.

TV COVERAGE IN-DEPTH AND BALANCED

18. (SBU) Television coverage has been balanced, with special reports delving in to Thailand's international responsibilities and the arms trading arena. On December 16, local network Channel 5 aired a special report on the interdiction in which Dr. Yongyuth Maiyarap, a popular news analyst, contended that the interdiction benefited Thailand. Yongyuth argued that Thailand had not reacted to U.S. pressure to conduct the interdiction, but rather Thailand, as a sovereign nation, had decided to conduct the action based on its national interest and responsibilities as a member of the United Nations. Also December 16, local broadcaster Channel 9 presented a balanced investigation into the arms trading world in general.

JOHN